University of Iowa: School of Journalism and Mass Communication

**IMC:3124:0001 Entertainment Media**

Tues-Thurs: 11-12:15; 205 Becker

Professor: Don McLeese

Office: E336 Adler Journalism Building

319-335-0664

515-770-3894 (cell)

[donald-mcleese@uiowa.edu](mailto:donald-mcleese@uiowa.edu)

**Drop-in/Office hours (drop in or by appointment): Tuesday, Thursday 12:25-1:55**

Or by appointment (email is generally the most efficient way to reach me).

**THE COURSE**

As resistant as I am to set-in-stone syllabi (preferring to keep you in a state of suspended animation and edgy anticipation that is journalism’s natural habitat), I feel that it is even less appropriate for this course than for others. We are focusing on a field where change is the only constant, where the technological revolution continues unabated and where yesterday’s radical disruption is tomorrow’s business as usual. Until the next radical disruption.

Within the current flux of entertainment media, principles that hold true today—and have for decades, even centuries—might be anachronisms by the end of the semester. Or the end of next week. I can’t predict what might dominate next month’s discussion the way Spotify (and streaming) became such a dominant topic in music circles a couple of years ago. Because a month or two before that, I had never heard of Spotify (and now stream about 95% of my new music).

After Apple entered the music streaming wars (and cannibalized its iTunes downloading profits in the process), a new front opened. Google (which owns YouTube) and Amazon are competing as well. How will these heavyweights compete against Spotify? Whatever happened to Pandora? Who is going to pay for the music and how? We’ll be asking these questions, and maybe even finding some answers.
And then there’s Netflix. And Amazon Prime. And now Disney and Apple and Hulu and others now competing for dominance of visual streaming content. And what does all this mean for movies (once seen almost exclusively in theaters) and TV (which some now watch on their smartphones)?

In every field of media, as all continue to converge, the identification of the major players changes constantly, as does the very nature of the games they are playing. Disney recently swallowed Fox (isn’t the fox supposed to do the swallowing?) with an eye toward streaming. A few years ago that sentence would have seemed senseless. What does it mean now?

I have former students who have real jobs with “social networking” in their titles, and earn real paychecks in that field, who started their educations before that term was widespread. I have seen blogs go from introductory puzzlement (“short for web log,” as if that says anything) to near ubiquity to borderline anachronism—killed by Twitter and Tumblr and Instagram, all of which arrived (and departed?) in an eye’s blink. I know that there’s been some rise and fall of interest in Pinterest, but I have no idea why. (Women like it more than men, right? Let’s discuss.) You probably use Snapchat; I don’t. You likely know more about TikTok than I do.

Does entertainment media include social media? Is there anything that doesn’t include social media? And a smartphone? Though some predict the smartphone is already on its way out, a little more than a decade after Apple revolutionized media culture by introducing the iPhone.

Easy come; easy go. Blink, and the whole world has changed. Let’s discuss. We will throughout the semester.

Believe it or not, I remember a world before YouTube. I remember when Facebook was the exclusive province of young people. Now it is dominated by old people (much to the embarrassment of their offspring who have yet to close their accounts). I still send emails when everybody else texts (though, for all I know, you all now communicate telepathically). I remember when phones were used not just primarily, but exclusively, for phone calls.

Do any of you still make phone calls on your phones? We once used our voices to make phone calls. Then we found it more convenient and less intrusive to text at someone—to type rather than talk. But typing is so much manual labor, so now we talk again—at nobody, at Siri or Alexa—to text this or search for this or that. Before long voice will give way again, to facial recognition (which already unlocks some of your phones), and we will no longer need to talk or type, but just think, and our devices will read our minds. Until they are no longer just reading our minds, but programming them.

Enough. I don’t need to convince you that I am old. And I don’t need to convince you that things are changing—continually, rapidly, dramatically. Is this scary? For my generation and some codgers even a generation or two younger, such constant, dramatic change induces cultural whiplash. For many of you, constant change is the way of the world; it is all you’ve ever known.
I may get nervous if the entire digital landscape seems to transform itself every couple of months; you may get nervous if it doesn’t. You’re already anticipating the next big thing, while I fear that it will make obsolete something that just cost me a few hundred bucks.

Together, we will analyze what has been and anticipate what is coming. There is no discrete body of knowledge that I expect you to master over the course of the semester. We will be illuminating what is happening as it is happening, and we can’t know now what that will be two weeks from now.

For example: Students in this course in recent years have predicted the downfall and even the demise of moviegoing at the mall cineplex, which has been in decline. Yet a year ago saw a boom resurgence in theater receipts. And the small indie bookstore has long been predicted to be going the way of the record store (and the dinosaur), first falling victim to the big chains, then to the internet big-footing of Amazon and the like. But those small indies are apparently making a big comeback. Why? CDs killed vinyl, or so we thought at the time, but which format looks healthier now. Why?

On the other hand, virtual reality has long been predicted as the next big thing, the technology that will put you right in the middle of the action rather than merely watching it on some screen. Yet that future has yet to arrive, and may never. (Just as 3D home TV has long been within the realm of technological possibility but has yet to find popular acceptance.)

I will actually be pleased if we collectively know less at the end of this semester than we think we do at the start, and if we leave this course with more questions than answers (as long as they are the right questions).

Yet, in my usual spirit of self-contradiction, let’s start with one postulate, which this course may well reaffirm (or refute as anachronistic): The emergence of new media always threatens old media, which then have two options—adapt or die. (You might have heard this in conjunction with Darwinism, or Social Darwinism.)

And as we scattershoot our way through the semester, we will see that every new medium has been widely perceived as the murderer of the old. Yet the old have generally adapted and survived. Repeatedly.

Until now?

Consider: Movies were supposed to kill live theater. Radio was supposed to kill commercial music, both live and recorded. TV was supposed to kill both radio and movies. And now digital technology is supposed to obliterate western culture as we know it, littering the media landscape with the corpses of the newspaper, music, film, publishing, cable TV and other industries. Will print on paper somehow adapt? Is there any value in paying for the cow of recorded music when you can get the milk streamed for free? Is it better to own (even digitally) than to subscribe?
So many questions.

Collectively, we will progress toward responses to such pressing issues of entertainment media and even venture a few predictions. Here is what I know for sure—you as the consumer will dictate where entertainment media are headed and why, just as you (or your older siblings) have dictated every technological transformation in the field, as large corporations try not only to meet but anticipate your every desire.

And what do you want? You want it free (or very cheap). You want it convenient (mobile). You want it all. And you want it now. So let’s so how all this plays out in the real world of commerce, where, I can assure you, nothing is free. Somebody always pays.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication is committed to your academic and professional success. In line with this commitment, we have identified particular learning outcomes that every student should obtain by the time they earn a JMC degree. You can find more information about these learning outcomes here: [http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/undergraduate-programs/assessment](http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/undergraduate-programs/assessment). We regularly assess the curriculum to determine whether students are achieving these outcomes. This course contributes to the following learning outcomes:

**3. Writing and Storytelling Learning Goal**

Understand that clear, concise, correct writing is at the heart of journalistic expression and that reporting and communicating it effectively requires a knowledge and achievement of the highest, professionally-accepted standards in all work.

**Learning Objective 1:** Students will demonstrate the ability to gather factual story elements, and to evaluate and express them in logical, narrative forms for multiple media and audiences.

**Learning Objective 2:** Students will display the ability to access and analyze data, report facts accurately, research and edit information responsibly and in a manner commensurate with professional standards.

**Learning Objective 3:** Students will demonstrate the ability to apply above concepts in a manner that is sensitive to audiences across all media.

**4. Multiculturalism Learning Goal**
To demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups (including communities defined by gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion and sexual orientation) in a global society in relationship to communications.

**Learning Objective 1:** Students will demonstrate an ability to produce media that serve the needs and interests of diverse communities and reflect their voices and experiences.

**Learning Objective 2:** Students will demonstrate sensitivity to and understanding of the cultures, histories, perspectives, and socio-economic and political situations of diverse groups.

**Learning Objective 3:** Students will demonstrate an ability to work with members of diverse groups to engage publicly over issues of community interest.

This class has other, course specific outcomes as well...

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

*To understand the seismic revolutions that continue to transform entertainment media, and media and society in general.

*To get a sense of where things are heading in this area through an illumination of how these fields have progressed and changed, even before the computer and the Internet changed everything.

*To recognize the common challenges facing digitized media—music, movies, TV, books, games et al.—as well as the specific problems and opportunities for each.

*To understand the personal implications of these profound changes. As one cliché asks, Are you playing the music, or is the music playing you?

*To learn how research and analyze the shifts and upheavals of entertainment media through a series of short responses and longer papers at the middle and end of this course.

**ATTENDANCE, ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING**

Because of both the experimental nature of the course and the volatility of the subject matter, attendance is **MANDATORY.** Every course I offer is primarily interactive, though the form that interaction might best take will reveal itself over the course of the semester. Until a year ago, I
had never taught this course in a classroom (it was previously online), and I had never had more than 20 students in the class. Then the capacity was raised to 50, in a large lecture hall. Now it has been reduced in half, a sweet spot as far as I’m concerned, and one that will facilitate more interactive discussion.

I have never been much for delivering prepared lectures, reading from a script, and I have a Power Point-phobia. The livelier the discussion we generate in here, and the more questions we ask and ponder, the richer the learning experience. (We will also extend the discussion beyond the classroom, through discussion boards on the course’s ICON/CANVAS site.) I might split you into smaller discussion groups. (I might not.)

I’ll have all sorts of other tricks at my disposal to help hook and keep your attention, but discussion remains the lifeblood of my educational method (or madness?).

Don’t worry know about how all this will play out. I’m not worried. I am a trained professional. I will adapt. So will you. And such adaptation is at the heart of what we will be studying in here all semester.

There is no assigned textbook, for reasons that this class should make clear (if this syllabus hasn’t already). As things change faster and faster, books are too slow to keep pace. I submitted my most recent book manuscript to a publisher that insisted production takes a full year—so if what I wrote didn’t sound fresh and new a year or so later, it would be obsolete on the day of publication. (Good luck with that.)

I will be updating modules on the ICON course site pretty much daily, with reading assignments, video links, discussion questions, whatever. I would urge you to monitor the New York Times in particular, where the Monday business section focuses on media matters and the Arts section often addresses industry developments that impact entertainment media as a whole. And we’ll be monitoring websites, blogs, videos, social-networking chatter and anything else that has bearing on the topic at hand (which, in chicken-or-the-egg fashion, might be largely dependent on developments that we can’t predict and topics in the news).

So, if you’re not attending, you’ll have trouble keeping pace and participating on the level that this course demands. I will be taking attendance, as often as I consider necessary and feasible.

**Final grades will be determined as follows:**

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION 30%

MIDTERM WRITING ASSIGNMENT: 20%

OTHER WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND/OR QUIZZES: 25%
FINAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT: 25%

There will be additional requirements and assignments for anyone registered in this course for graduate credit, which will be adapted to these percentages.

Most assignments will be due in the (virtual online) dropbox before class. Those late will be docked a letter grade per day. (A response due Tuesday that deserves an A will receive a B if I don’t get it until Wednesday, etc. If you turn it in on the deadline day but after the beginning of class, it will be docked a half-grade—an A paper would receive a B+ if turned in after class.) Any exceptions will require a really, really good reason, and extensions will rarely be granted (in accordance with the importance of deadlines in journalism). I don’t want to hear about how sick you were the day after the assignment was due. Working journalists meet their deadlines. If they don’t, they won’t be working for long.

I don’t deal in points, numbers, percentiles, rubrics. I see a crucial part of my educational mission as helping you prepare for the working world. Within that world, if you show up, do your best, ask questions when you don’t understand, complete all assignments on time, you will be fine—and you will continue to earn your paycheck and eventually even a raise or a promotion. And if you don’t (show up, do your work well and on time, etc.) you will be fired. There won’t be any matter of how many points you can earn or lose.

I use letter grades, based on the quality of your work (which includes spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.—in other words, clean copy, which is a baseline requirement of this profession of journalism). If you don’t understand why you’ve been given a grade, let’s talk about it. I won’t likely change my mind, but perhaps I can open yours. If you concern yourself with how much you can learn rather than which hoops you need to jump through to earn whatever grade, you’ll do fine.

Any ungraded assignments (like the media diary that is your first) will be included within the ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION portion of the grade, as will contributing to discussion boards outside class.

In monitoring your own progress and performance, you should pay no attention to anything on the ICON/CANVAS gradebook that is not a letter grade assigned by me. The network seems to make some computations on its own, in percentages or some such, and I do not use them. You should, for example, come to class because I insist on your coming to class, and know when you are not—not because the computer tells you you have a 67 or whatever in attendance.

There will be an extra credit writing assignment toward the end of the semester. Those who complete it, and do it well, will have the opportunity to nudge your final grade the next half-grade higher. In other words, if you are between a B and a B+, and you do the extra credit assignment, you will receive a B+. (But if you are on the lower end of the B spectrum, closer to the B-, extra credit won’t earn you that B+.) I’d like all of you to do the extra credit assignment,
just to show me what you’ve learned and because you find it interesting, but I won’t make any of you do it.

Teaching Policies & Resources — Syllabus Insert

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Information for Undergraduates

Absences and Attendance
Students are responsible for attending class and for contributing to the learning environment of a course. Students are also responsible for knowing their course absence policies, which will vary by instructor. All absence policies, however, must uphold the UI policy related to student illness, mandatory religious obligations, including Holy Day obligations, unavoidable circumstances, or University authorized activities (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences). Students may use this absence form to aid communication; the instructor will decide if the absence is excused or unexcused (https://clas.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/ABSENCE%20EXPLANATION%20FORM2019.pdf).

Academic Integrity
All undergraduates enrolled in courses offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty. Misconduct is reported to the College, resulting in suspension or other sanctions, with sanctions communicated with the student through the UI email address (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/academic-fraud-honor-code).

Accommodations for Disabilities
UI is committed to an educational experience that is accessible to all students. A student may request academic accommodations for a disability (such as mental health, attention, learning, vision, and physical or health-related condition) by registering with Student Disability Services (SDS). The student is then responsible for discussing specific accommodations with the instructor. More information is at https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/.

Administrative Home of the Course
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) is the administrative home
of this course and governs its add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and related policies. Other colleges may have different policies. CLAS policies may be found here: https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook.

Communication and the Required Use of UI Email
Students are responsible for official correspondences sent to the UI email address (uiowa.edu) and must use this address for all communication within UI (Operations Manual, III.15.2).

Complaints
Students with a complaint about an academic issue should first visit with the instructor or course supervisor and then with the Chair of the department or program offering the course; students may next bring the issue to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. For more information, see https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/student-rights-responsibilities.

Final Examination Policies
The final exam schedule is announced around the fifth week of classes; students are responsible for knowing the date, time, and place of a final exam. Students should not make travel plans until knowing this information. No exams of any kind are allowed the week before finals. Visit https://registrar.uiowa.edu/final-examination-scheduling-policies.

Nondiscrimination in the Classroom
UI is committed to making the classroom a respectful and inclusive space for all people irrespective of their gender, sexual, racial, religious or other identities. Toward this goal, students are invited to optionally share their preferred names and pronouns with their instructors and classmates. The University of Iowa prohibits discrimination and harassment against individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, and other identity categories set forth in the University’s Human Rights policy. For more information, contact the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity (diversity.uiowa.edu).

Sexual Harassment
Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community must uphold the UI mission and contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment must be reported immediately. For assistance, please see https://osmrc.uiowa.edu/.
COURSE CALENDAR

Week one
Jan 21-23

Preparing for take-off: Fasten your seatbelts. Technological troubleshooting, syllabus, getting to
know you, lay of the land. Where are we now and where are we going. What is a book? A
record? What is the difference between a TV show and a movie? How do you consume media
and how has this changed? And we’ll start with movies and streaming.

Assign: Media diary due before class on Tuesday, 1

Week two
Jan 28-30

Course origins, media parallels, disruptions and paradigm shifts. Continue the discussion of
streaming and its implications.

Week three
Feb 4-6

Movies (or films, for the higher-brow among you) and how a medium that threatened others has
itself become threatened (or at least challenged). As movie becomes more of a larger-than-life
spectacle—3-D, Imax—has subtler, more mature entertainment become the province of HBO
and AMC?

Week four
Feb 11-13

More movies and transition to TV

Week five
Feb 18-20

Television, time shifting, multi-platforms. How long until your TV screen is also your
computer’s? And all programming is “on demand.” What is “bundling” and how long will it
last? We’ll also work in some contextual history on what TV used to be like (three networks, rabbit ear antennas) and what has changed. And what hasn’t.

**Week six**

Feb 25-27

Video games—art, entertainment, cultural menace. Or all of the above?

**Week seven**

Mar 3-5

Video games continued, and the dissolving lines distinguishing video games and special-effects, action movies.

Discuss midterm writing assignment

**Week eight**

March 10-12

Brave new worlds of visual entertainment. Are the conventional categories obsolete?

Recap the first half of the semester's focus on visual entertainment on screens

**Week nine: SPRING BREAK**

March 15-22

**Week ten**

March 24-26

Midterm writing assignment due Tuesday, 3/24

Radio and network TV: How the latter failed to kill the former (as widely predicted), and how the former has continued to change with the times. Can this precedent apply to the digital age, or are we now in the midst of a brand new media ballgame? Will people really pay for satellite radio? (Why would they pay for TV? Or water?)

**Week eleven**

March 31- April 2

Radio and popular music. The building of empires and the toppling of them.
**Week twelve**

April 7-9

Music: The canary in the coalmine. How college kids and Napster launched a revolution in digital file sharing that brought the music industry to its knees.

**Week thirteen**

April 14-16

Popular music—Who is consuming what, where, why? The place of music is popular culture—the more pervasive, the increasingly irrelevant? What is the product, what is the promotion, where is the money?

**Week fourteen**

April 21-23

The publishing industry. Will books survive? (Has vinyl?) How has the digital age effected creation, consumption, distribution, promotion. Is the indie bookstore on the verge of becoming the blacksmith shop? Is book criticism less significant than ever or more significant? Does it pay? Should it?

Discuss optional extra credit assignment

**Week fifteen**

April 28-30

More on Apple, Amazon on paradigm shifts. How did a computer maker and an online bookseller find themselves as chief competitors battling for world media domination? And where does Facebook fit in this battle? We’ll examine some business models and discuss different means to similar end.

**Week sixteen**

May 5-7

Putting it all together—the big, shifting map of entertainment media. What do the different forms have in common and where to they differ? Which are the most threatened and which have the greatest promise? Where is it all going? Final paper due.

**NO FINAL EXAM. HAVE A GREAT SUMMER!**